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WILDE v WHISTLER

BEING

AN ACRIMONIOUS CORRESPONDENCE

ON ART

BETWEEN

OSCAR WILDE

AND

JAMES A McNEILL WHISTLER

LONDON PRIVATELY PRINTED MCMVI

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Mr WHISTLER'S TEN O'CLOCK,

BY MR OSCAR WILDE.

"*RENGAINES!*"

Pall Mall Gazette, Feb. 21st, 1885.

LAST night at Prince's Hall, Mr. Whistler made his first public appearance as a lecturer on Art, and spoke for more than an hour with really marvellous eloquence on the absolute uselessness of all lectures of the kind. Mr. Whistler began his lecture with a very pretty *aria* on pre-historic history, describing how in earlier times hunter and warrior would go forth to chase and foray, while the artist sat at home making cup and bowl for their service. Rude imitations of nature they were first, like the gourd bottle, till the sense of beauty and form developed, and, in all its exquisite proportions, the first vase was fashioned. Then came a higher civilisation of Architecture and Arm-chairs, and with exquisite design, and dainty diaper, the useful things of Life were made lovely : and the hunter and the warrior lay on the couch when they were tired, and, when they were thirsty, drank from the bowl, and

never cared to lose the exquisite proportions of the one, or the delightful ornament of the other: and this attitude of the primitive anthropophagous Philistine formed the text of the lecture, and was the attitude which Mr Whistler entreated his audience to adopt towards Art. Remembering, no doubt, many charming invitations to wonderful private views, this fashionable assemblage seemed somewhat aghast, and not a little amused, at being told that the slightest appearance among a civilized people of any joy in beautiful things is a grave impertinence to all painters; but Mr. Whistler was relentless, and with charming ease, and much grace of manner, explained to the public that the only thing they should cultivate was ugliness, and that on their permanent stupidity rested all the hopes of art in the future.

The scene was in every way delightful; he stood there, a miniature Mephistopheles mocking the majority! he was like a brilliant surgeon lecturing to a class composed of subjects destined ultimately for dissection, and solemnly assuring them how valuable to science their maladies were and how absolutely uninteresting the slightest symptoms of health on their part would be. In fairness to the audience, however, I must say that they seemed extremely gratified at being rid of the dreadful responsibility of admiring anything, and nothing could have exceeded their enthusiasm when they were told by Mr Whistler that no matter how vulgar their dresses were, or how hideous their surroundings at home, still it was possible that a great

painter, if there was such a thing, could, by contemplating them in the twilight, and half closing his eyes, see them under really picturesque conditions, and produce a picture which they were not to attempt to understand, much less dare to enjoy. Then there were some arrows, barbed and brilliant, shot off, with all the speed and splendour of fireworks at the archaeologists, who spend their lives in verifying the birth-places of nobodies, and estimate the value of a work of art by its date or decay; at the art critics who always treat a picture as if it were a novel, and try and find out the plot; at dilettanti in general, and amateurs in particular, and *(O mea culpa!)* at dress reformers most of all. "Did not Velasquez paint crinolines? What more do you want?"

Having thus made a holocaust of humanity, Mr Whistler turned to Nature, and in a few minutes convicted her of the Crystal Palace, Bank Holidays, and a general overcrowding of detail, both in omnibuses and in landscapes; and then, in a passage of singular beauty, not unlike one that occurs in Corot's letters, spoke of the artistic value of dim dawns and dusks, when the mean facts of life are lost in evanescent and exquisite effects, when common things are touched with mystery and transfigured with beauty: when the warehouses become as palaces, and the tall chimneys of the factory seem like campaniles in the silver air.

Finally, after making a strong protest against anybody but a painter judging of painting, and a pathetic appeal to the

audience not to be lured by the aesthetic movement into having beautiful things about them, Mr Whistler concluded his lecture with a pretty passage about Fusiyama on a fan, and made his bow to an audience which he had succeeded in completely fascinating by his wit, his brilliant paradoxes, and at times, his real eloquence. Of course, with regard to the value of beautiful surroundings I entirely differ from Mr. Whistler. An artist is not an isolated fact, he is the resultant of a certain *milieu* and a certain entourage, and can no more be born of a nation that is devoid of any sense of beauty than a fig can grow from a thorn or a rose blossom from a thistle. That an artist will find beauty in ugliness, *le beau dans l'horrible*, is now a commonplace of the schools, the argot of the atelier, but I strongly deny that charming people should be condemned to live with magenta ottomans and Albert blue curtains in their rooms in order that some painter may observe the side lights on the one and the values of the other. Nor do I accept the dictum that only a painter is a judge of painting. I say that only an artist is a judge of art; there is a wide difference. As long as a painter is a painter merely, he should not be allowed to talk of anything but mediums and megilp, and on those subjects should be compelled to hold his tongue; it is only when he becomes an artist that the secret laws of artistic creation are revealed to him. For there are not many arts but one art merely: poem, picture, and Parthenon, sonnet and statue—all are in their essence the same, and he who knows one, knows all.

But the poet is the supreme artist, for he is the master of colour and form, and the real musician besides, and is lord over all life and all arts; and so to the poet beyond all others are these mysteries known; to Edgar Allan Poe and to Baudelaire, not to Benjamin West and Paul Delaroche. However, I would not enjoy anybody else's lectures unless in a few points I disagreed with them, and Mr Whistler's lecture last night was, like everything that he does, a masterpiece. Not merely for its clever satire and amusing jests will it be remembered, but for the pure and perfect beauty of many of its passages—passages delivered with an earnestness which seemed to amaze those who had looked on Mr Whistler as a master of persiflage merely, and had not known him, as we do, as a master of painting also. For that he is indeed one of the very greatest masters of painting, is my opinion. And I may add that in this opinion Mr Whistler himself entirely concurs.

OSCAR WILDE.

REFLECTION: It is not enough that our simple Sunflower flourish on his "figs"—he has now grafted Edgar Poe on the "rose" tree of the early American Market in "a certain milieu" of dry goods and sympathy; and "a certain entourage" of worship and wooden nutmegs.

Born of a Nation, not absolutely "devoid of any sense of beauty"—
Their idol—cherished, listened to, and understood!—
Foolish Baudelaire!—Mistaken Mallarmé!

J. A. McN. W.

TENDERNESS IN TITE STREET

TO THE POET:

The World.

OSCAR—I have read your exquisite article in the *Pall Mall.*

Nothing is more delicate, in the flattery of "the Poet" to "the Painter," than the *naïveté* of "the Poet" in the choice of his Painters—Benjamin West and Paul Delaroche!

You have pointed out that "the Painter's" mission is to find "*le beau dans l'horrible,*" and have left to "the Poet" the discovery of "*l'horrible*" *dans* "*le beau!*"

J. A. McN. WHISTLER.

CHELSEA.

TO THE PAINTER:

The World.

DEAR BUTTERFLY—By the aid of a biographical dictionary, I made the discovery that there were once two painters, called Benjamin West and Paul Delaroche, who rashly lectured upon Art. As of their works nothing at all remains, I conclude that they explained themselves away.

Be warned in time, James; and remain, as I do, incomprehensible. To be great is to be misunderstood.—*Tout à vous,*

OSCAR WILDE.

REFLECTION: I do know a bird, who like Oscar, with his head in the sand, still believes in the undiscovered!

If to be misunderstood is to be great, it was rash in Oscar to reveal the source of his inspirations: the "*Biographical Dictionary.*"

J. A. McN. W.

TO THE COMMITTEE OF THE "NATIONAL ART EXHIBITION"

The World, Nov. 17, 1886.

GENTLEMEN—I am naturally interested in any effort made among painters to prove that they are alive—but when I find, thrust in the van of your leaders, the body of my dead 'Arry, I know that putrefaction alone can result. When following 'Arry, there comes on Oscar, you finish in farce, and bring upon yourselves the scorn and ridicule of your confrères in Europe.

What has Oscar in common with Art? except that he dines at our tables, and picks from our platters the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces. Oscar — the amiable, irresponsible, esurient Oscar—with no more sense of a picture than of the fit of a coat, has the courage of the opinions . . . of others!

With 'Arry and Oscar you have avenged the Academy.

I am, gentlemen, yours obediently,

J. A. McN. WHISTLER.

Letter read at a meeting of this Society, associated for purposes of Art reform.

Enclosed to the Poet, with a line: "Oscar, you must really keep outside the radius." J. A. McN. W.

QUAND MÊME!

The World, Nov. 24, 1886.

ATLAS, this is very sad! With our James vulgarity begins at home, and should be allowed to stay there.

A vous, OSCAR WILDE.

TO WHOM:

"A poor thing," Oscar—"but" for once, I suppose "your own."

J. A. McN. W.

THE HABIT OF SECOND NATURES

Truth, Jan. 2, 1890.

MOST VALIANT *TRUTH*—Among your ruthless exposures of the shams of to-day, nothing, I confess, have I enjoyed with keener relish than your late tilt at that arch-imposter and pest of the period—the all-pervading plagiarist!

I learn, by the way, that in America he may, under the "Law of '84," as it is called, be criminally prosecuted, incarcerated, and made to pick oakum, as he has hitherto picked brains—and pockets!

How was it that, in your list of culprits, you omitted that fattest of offenders—our own Oscar?

His methods are brought again freshly to my mind, by the indefatigable and tardy Romeike, who sends me newspaper cuttings of "Herbert Vivian's Reminiscences," in which, among other entertaining anecdotes, is told at length, the Story of Oscar simulating the becoming pride of author, upon a certain evening, in the club of the Academy students, and arrogating to himself the responsibility of the lecture, with which, at his earnest prayer, I had, in good fellowship, crammed him, that

he might not add deplorable failure to foolish appearance, in his anomalous position, as art expounder, before his clear-headed audience.

He went forth, on that occasion, as my St. John—but, forgetting that humility should be his chief characteristic, and unable to withstand the unaccustomed respect with which his utterances were received, he not only trifled with my shoe, but bolted with the latchet!

Mr. Vivian, in his book, tells us, further on, that lately, in an article in the *Nineteenth Century* on the "Decay of Lying," Mr. Wilde has deliberately and incautiously incorporated, "without a word of comment," a portion of the well-remembered letter in which, after admitting his rare appreciation and amazing memory, I acknowledge that "Oscar has the courage of the opinions . . . of others!"

My recognition of this, his latest proof of open admiration, I send him in the following little note, which I fancy you may think *à propos* to publish, as an example to your readers, in similar circumstances, of noble generosity in sweet reproof, tempered, as it should be, to the lamb in his condition:—

"Oscar, you have been down the area again, I see!

"I had forgotten you, and so allowed your hair to grow over the sore place. And now, while I looked the other way, you have stolen *your own scalp!* And potted it in more of your pudding.

"Labby has pointed out that, for the detected plagiarist, there is still

one way to self-respect (besides hanging himself of course), and that is for him boldly to declare, 'Je prends mon bien là ou je le trouve.'

"You, Oscar, can go further, and with fresh effrontery, that will bring you the envy of all criminal *confrères*, unblushingly boast, 'Moi, je prends *son* bien là ou je le trouve!'"

J. A. McN. WHISTLER.

CHELSEA.

IN THE MARKET PLACE

Truth, Jan. 9, 1890.

SIR—I can hardly imagine that the public are in the very smallest degree interested in the shrill shrieks of "Plagiarism" that proceed from time to time out of the lips of silly vanity or incompetent mediocrity.

However, as Mr. James Whistler has had the impertinence to attack me with both venom and vulgarity in your columns, I hope you will allow me to state that the assertions contained in his letters are as deliberately untrue as they are deliberately offensive.

The definition of a disciple as one who has the courage of the opinions of his master is really too old even for Mr. Whistler to be allowed to claim it, and as for borrowing Mr. Whistler's ideas about Art, the only thoroughly original ideas I have ever heard him express have had reference to his own superiority as a painter over painters greater than himself.

It is a trouble for any gentleman to have to notice the lucubrations of so ill-bred and ignorant a person as Mr. Whistler, but your publication of his insolent letter left me no option in the matter.

I remain, Sir, faithfully yours,

OSCAR WILDE.

PANIC

Truth, Jan. 16, 1890.

O TRUTH!—Cowed and humiliated, I acknowledge that our Oscar is at last original. At bay, and sublime in his agony, he certainly has, for once, borrowed from no living author, and comes out in his own true colours—as his own "gentleman."

How shall I stand against his just anger, and his damning allegations! for it must be clear to your readers, that, besides his clean polish, as prettily set forth in his epistle, I, alas! am but the "ill-bred and ignorant person," whose "lucubrations" "it is a trouble" for him "to notice."

Still will I, desperate as is my condition, point out that though "impertinent," "venomous," and "vulgar," he claims me as his "master"—and, in the dock, bases his innocence upon such relation between us.

In all humility, therefore, I admit that the outcome of my "silly vanity and incompetent mediocrity," must be the incarnation: "OSCAR WILDE."

J. A. Mc.N. WHISTLER.

Mea culpa! the Gods may perhaps forgive and forget.

To you, *Truth*—champion of the truth—I leave the brave task of proclaiming again that the story of the lecture to the students of the Royal Academy was, as I told it to you, no fiction.

In the presence of Mr Waldo Story did Oscar make his prayer for preparation; and at his table was he entrusted with the materials for his crime.

You also shall again unearth, in the *Nineteenth Century Review* of Jan. 1889, page 37, the other appropriated property, slily stowed away, in an article on "The Decay of Lying"—though why Decay!

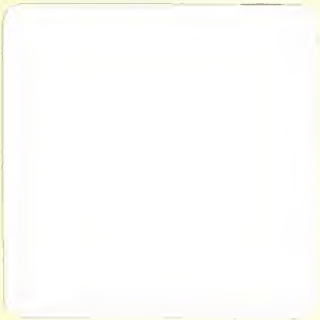
To shirk this matter thus is craven, doubtless; but I am awe-stricken and tremble, for truly, "the rage of the sheep is terrible!"

J. A. McN. WHISTLER.

JUST INDIGNATION

OSCAR—How dare you! What means the disguise?

Restore those things to Nathan's, and never again let me find you masquerading the streets of my Chelsea in the combined costumes of Kossuth and Mr Mantalini!

J. A. McN. WHISTLER.

Upon seeing the Poet, in Polish cap and green overcoat, befrogged, and wonderfully befurred.